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ABSTRACT

This study examined: (1) whether parents of different religious affiliations varied in their reported use of a range of discipline techniques; and (2) religious differences in parents' attitudes about the corporal punishment they received as children, and the corporal punishment they administer to their own children. Data were collected from 79 mothers and 39 fathers of 118 3-year-old children. Eighty percent of the participants were European-Americans, 2 percent African-American, 15 percent Hispanic-American, with 3 percent not reporting ethnic affiliation. The majority of parents had at least a college degree; 88 percent had an annual family income of $30,000 and above. The parents completed three questionnaires: Demographics, including religious affiliation; Parental Responses to Child Misbehavior; and Parental Attitudes Toward Spanking (PATS). Four groups were formed on the basis of religious affiliation: (1) liberal Protestants; (2) conservative Protestants; (3) Roman Catholics; and (4) no preference. Results indicated that religious affiliation was associated with the types of discipline parents reported using in an average week; conservative Protestants reported spanking significantly more often than parents in the other three groups. A factor analysis of items from the PATS revealed four factors: perceptions of Appropriateness and Severity of spanking received from their parents, and the Instrumentality and Emotionality associated with spanking their own children. Conservative Protestants rated their own childhood spankings as appropriate more often than did parents in two or more of the other groups, and they endorsed more strongly the belief that spanking is instrumentally effective with their own children. (Contains 8 references.) (KDFB)

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Parental Beliefs and Use of Parental Discipline:

The Role of Religious Affiliation

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Introduction

Proponents of the ecological perspective on parenting behavior argue that child-rearing in any specific family occurs in the context of micro-, exo-, and macro-systems (Belsky, 1980), the latter of which includes a family's religious affiliation (Wiehe, 1990). Although religious differences as a source of behavioral differences have been largely ignored by social scientists (Hadden, 1987), recently some attention has been directed toward differences among religious groups in attitudes about and parents' use of corporal punishment (Ellison, Bartowski, & Segal, 1996; Ellison, & Sherkat, 1993). The present study extends that research by examining whether parents of four religious affiliations vary in their reported use of a range of discipline techniques. Because corporal punishment in particular has come under mounting criticism as a child rearing practice (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996; Straus, 1994), this study also examines religious differences in parents' attitudes about the corporal punishment they received as children as well as the corporal punishment they have meted out as parents. Such attitudes may be the source of differences in the frequency with which parents report using corporal punishment.

Method

Independent data were collected from 79 mothers and 39 fathers of 3-year-old children (49 males, 69 females). Ninety-four (80%) of the participants were European-American, 2 (2%) were African-American, 17 (15%) were Hispanic-American, and 4 (3%) did not report their ethnic affiliation. The majority of the parents had at least a college degree (65%); the rest had either attended some college or completed high school. Eighty-eight percent of the parents reported annual family incomes of $30,000 and above, with the remaining (12%) reporting incomes between $15,000 and $29,000. Participating parents completed three questionnaires: Demographics, including religious affiliation; Parental Responses to Child Misbehavior (PRCM; Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995), and Parental Attitudes Toward Spanking (PATS, developed for this study). On the PRCM parents indicated on a 7-point scale from "never" to "9 or more times per week" how often they engage in nine common disciplinary practices in an average week (reason, divert, negotiate, threaten, time-out, spank, ignore, withdraw, and yell). The PATS is a

26-item questionnaire that asks parents about their childhood experiences of being spanked as well as their current experiences spanking their own children.

Results

Parents were divided into four groups according to their professed religious affiliation: Liberal Protestants (n = 43), Conservative Protestants (n = 19), Roman Catholics (n = 33), and "no preference" (n = 23). Preliminary analyses found no differences for parent sex or sex of target child. Further, no significant differences were found between religious groups with regard to socioeconomic variables such as occupational status, educational level, or income (F [12, 191] = 1.39, n.s.).

A MANOVA performed on the PRCM determined that religious affiliation was significantly associated with the types of discipline parents reported using in an average week (F [27, 290] = 1.57, $p < .05$). The follow-up ANOVAs and t-tests reported in Table 1 reveal that parents of the four religious affiliation groups only differed in the frequency of their use of spanking; Conservative Protestants reported spanking significantly more often than parents of the other three religious groups.

A factor analysis of items from the PATS questionnaire resulted in four factors: perceptions of **Appropriateness** and **Severity** of spankings received from their parents, and the **Instrumentality** and **Emotionality** associated with their spanking their own children. A significant MANOVA effect for religion was found for the four factors (F [12, 260] =2.04, $p < .05$). Reliable group differences emerged for the **Appropriateness** and **Instrumentality** factors. In both cases, Conservative Protestants differed from two or more of the other groups in the extent to which they rated their childhood spankings as appropriate and in their endorsement of the belief that spanking is more instrumentally effective with their children (see Table 2).

Discussion and Conclusion

This investigation of the link between religious affiliation and parental discipline demonstrates that religious beliefs, as they pertain to child rearing, are indeed associated with different parenting practices. In particular, Conservative Protestant parents had more favorable beliefs about corporal punishment and used corporal punishment more frequently than parents with Liberal Protestant, Roman Catholic, or non-preferential religious affiliations. More than the three other religious groups examined here, Conservative Protestant parents endorsed the instrumental effectiveness and appropriateness of corporal punishment as a discipline technique, indicating that the differences in the frequency with which parents reported using spanking may be due to differences in their beliefs about the utility of spanking. It is equally important to note that parents of the four religious groups did not differ in the frequency with which they reported using eight other disciplinary techniques including threatening and yelling, two practices that may be equally as aversive to children as corporal punishment. Yet given the long- and short-term risks associated with corporal punishment in particular (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996; Straus, 1994), these findings of religious differences are important for determining the etiology of this controversial child rearing practice. Our results highlight the need to include religious affiliation in the category of social-cognitive factors that determine parenting behavior and to examine its effects on parent-child relationships.

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Table 1
Religious Differences in Parental Responses to Children's Misbehaviors

Response	Religious Preference				F	p
	Roman Catholic N = 33[1]	Liberal Protestant N = 43	Conservative Protestant N = 19	No Preference N = 23		
Reason	5.8	6.0	5.3	6.2	1.83	.15
Divert	5.4	5.3	4.7	5.5	1.04	.38
Negotiate	5.4	4.8	4.2	5.6	2.59	.06
Threaten	3.9	3.8	3.8	4.1	.18	.91
Time-out	3.9	3.7	3.4	3.4	.62	.60
Spank or Slap	**1.7[a]**	**1.8[a]**	**2.7[b]**	**1.6[a]**	**5.17****	**.002**
Ignore	3.2	3.0	2.7	3.2	.37	.78
Withdraw Privileges	2.7	3.1	3.1	2.9	.30	.83
Yell	3.8	3.2	2.4	3.0	2.38	.07

Notes. N = 118. Means range from 0 (never) to 7 (nine or more times per week). Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differed at $p < .05$ in follow-up t tests.
[1] Sample sizes in individual analyses differ.

Table 2
Religious Differences in Parental Attitudes Toward Spanking

	Sample Item	Total Number of Items	Religious Preference				F	p
			Roman Catholic N= 33[1]	Liberal Protestant N= 43	Conservative Protestant N= 19	No Preference N= 23		
Childhood Memories								
Appropriateness	**"How good for you was being spanked as a child?"**	**2**	**3.7^{abc}**	**3.5^{ac}**	**4.7^{b}**	**2.7^{c}**	**4.32****	**.007**
Severity	"Usually how severe were the spankings you received?"	2	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.7	.53	.67
With Own Children								
Instrumentality	**"How effective do you think spanking is to get your child to stop misbehaving in the future?"**	**12**	**3.7^{ac}**	**3.9^{a}**	**5.0^{b}**	**3.0^{c}**	**6.70*****	**.001**
Emotionality	"After your child has misbehaved and right before you discipline him/her, how irritated do you usually feel?"	3	5.0	5.0	4.3	5.1	2.01	.12

Notes. N = 118. Means range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Means in the same row that do not share superscripts differed at $p < .05$ in follow-up t tests. [1] Sample sizes in individual analyses differ.